

The unique Nature of The Bible and how to read It

A Reformational-Philosophical Reflection

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Samevatting

Die unieke aard van Die Bybel en hoe om dit te lees; 'n Reformatories-filosofiese besinning

Die meeste Christene sal sonder probleme die Bybel as die gesagvolle Woord van God, wat deur hulle verstaan en gehoorsaam moet word, aanvaar. Op die keper beskou, blyk uit die verskillende wyses waarop gelowiges die Bybel lees en wetenskaplikes dit bestudeer egter dat hulle die Bybel op totaal verskillende maniere beskou. Voorbeelde is dat dit 'n leerstellige, morele of historiese teks sou wees. Hoewel al sulke visies waarheidsmomente bevat, sien hulle nie die unieke aard van die Skrif as geloofsboek raak nie en kan gevolglik ook nie daaraan in hulle Skrifverklaring reg laat geskied nie.

'n Christelik-filosofiese benadering kan 'n beter antwoord bied op dié kernvraag wat die werklike aard van die Bybel as geskrif is. Gevolglik kan dit ook duideliker maak waarom en hoe die Bybel vir die hele lewe van die gelowige gesagvol is. Terselfdertyd kan bestaande metodes van Bybellees en -bestudering verbeter of vervang word met maniere wat die unieke karakter van God se Skrifopenbaring erken.

1. Introduction: the problem, how it will be approached and the set-up of the investigation

1.1 The issue

This article departs from the assumption that the Bible is the authoritative Word of God. Most Christians will agree with such a point of departure,

yet they can use the Word of God in different ways, and on that basis have diverse opinions.

Thus it appears that it is not sufficient to say that one accepts the Scriptures as authoritative. The problem is that one should know what the nature of the Scriptures is to be able to know what kind of authority it has and how it should be exercised. With right Olthuis (1979:66) says: "... a simple affirmation of Scriptural authority guarantees neither a true doctrine of Scripture nor a true interpretation of Scripture ... Biblical authority ... is empty – mere lip service – unless we know to understand what the Bible means." Therefore this article would like to ask the basic question what the unique nature of the Scriptures is.

Although the writer is conscious of the fact that in theology shelves full of books were written about revelation in the Scriptures, this investigation will not go the theological way. It is an attempt to investigate specifically whether a Christian philosophy can also make a contribution to clarifying this vital problem.

1.2 Set-up

The problem will be viewed from the following angles. (1) The first step draws attention to the Bible as the written part of God's revelation. (2) Subsequently the issue is raised whether more about the nature of this Book can be learned from its contents. (3) A further step is to investigate what can be deduced about the nature of the Biblical revelation when the different methods of exegesis are considered. (4) Then something more about its nature and authority is determined from the kind of language used in the Scriptures. (5) In the fifth main point (that links up with the previous one) it is investigated what it entails to describe the Bible by the metaphor of light. (6) The next main part will sum up some of the gains of such a new Christian philosophical approach to the Scriptures. (7) Finally some hermeneutic implications will be pointed out briefly.

1.3 Nature

It is not the intention of this article to evaluate the existing viewpoints of Reformational philosophers and/or put forth a new viewpoint. It is meant primarily for the uninitiated in this kind of philosophical thought. In line with this intention it is a simple, comprehensible, elementary introduction. So while it may not mean much to philosophical scholars in this field, it could be of great value to other readers.

2. The Bible as God's written revelation

The Bible is not God's only revelation and should not be read apart from his other revelations.

2.1 A threefold revelation

In the Reformed tradition it was usually confessed that the Bible is not the only way in which God has revealed Himself. In the *Heidelberg Catechism* (Lord's Day 6, answer 19) it says, for instance, that God already made Himself known in Paradise, thereafter had his Word proclaimed by the prophets and finally fulfilled it in his Son.

The Belgic Confession also differentiates in article 2 between two ways in which man can know God: (1) his creation, preservation and government of the whole world, and (2) his holy or divine Word. (3) The rest of this confession (cf. e.g. Art. 8) also calls Christ God's Word incarnate.

2.2 Neglected in the past

Unfortunately for the greater part of the Reformed Evangelical tradition God's creational revelation was recognised, but without enough emphasis on understanding and applying it. The preponderant emphasis was laid on the Scriptures and its message of sin and redemption. "The dogma of creation has always been there, affirmed, in the church background of benign neglect, while we concentrated on 'salvation' and 'sanctification' ... we have lacked to develop reflection true to Scripture on creation ..." (Seerveld, 2000b:206).

This is not what was originally meant by *sola Scriptura*. This well-known slogan from the 16th Century Reformation originally was meant to take a stand against the Roman Catholic emphasis on tradition, the power of the pope, the authoritarian authority of the church and the monopoly of the church on reading the Bible. Later on it got a different meaning (cf. Kruger, 2000 & 2003): a facet of God's revelation (the Scriptures) was given preference while less weight was given to another part thereof (God's revelation through creation). This under-evaluation is evident for instance from the use of the word "general" in opposition to "special" revelation. Troost (1978) devotes almost a whole article to the way the Scriptures were made independent and absolute over against the way God's creational revelation was hollowed out and made sterile in most orthodox theologies.

Such a viewpoint had numerous unhealthy consequences. One of the more serious was that too much was expected from the Scriptures. It had to supply answers to all possible problems (a viewpoint called biblicism or fundamentalism).

Rightfully another Reformational philosopher wrote the following: "We need to study not only God's Word but also God's world; we study the

world in the light of the Word. We need to study not only Isaiah but also industry. Not only Philemon but also politics. Not only Acts but arts. It is not for us to choose between knowing the Bible or the world; we need to *know the world biblically*” (Marshall, 1998:58).

2.3 Honour restored in earlier Reformational philosophy

Before indicating how various Reformational philosophers saw God’s revelation, attention is drawn to the fact that the well-known Reformed theologian, H. Bavinck (1854-1921), already proposed his own philosophy of revelation. Three of his most significant insights were the following:

First it is important that he stresses the revelational character of the *whole* creation: “Revelation, while having its centre in the Person of Christ, in its periphery extends to the uttermost ends of creation. It does not stand isolated in nature and history, does not resemble an island in the ocean, nor a drop of oil upon water. With the whole of nature, with the whole of history, with the whole of humanity, with family and society, with science and art it is intimately connected. The world itself rests on revelation; revelation is the presupposition, the foundation, the secret of all that exists ...” (Bavinck, 1979:27).

Secondly Bavinck emphasises the unity and interdependence between God’s creational and Scriptural revelations: “General revelation leads to special, special revelation points back to general. The one calls for the other, and without it remains imperfect and unintelligible. Together they proclaim the manifold wisdom of God displayed in creation and redemption” (Bavinck, 1979:28).

A third central idea of great significance in Bavinck’s reflections is that he regards the will of God as the contents of his revelation: “Revelation is a disclosure ... What neither nature, nor history, neither mind nor heart, neither science nor art can teach us it makes known to us – the fixed, unalterable *will* of God ... This will is the secret of revelation” (Bavinck, 1979:25).

What Bavinck says here, is not followed in many Evangelical and Reformed circles. As will transpire later on it is, however, exactly such viewpoints that are typical of the later Reformational philosophy.

2.4 Special attention within contemporary Reformational philosophy

The author regards it as one of the vital contributions of Reformational philosophy (Vollenhoven, Dooyeweerd and their numerous followers

worldwide) that they not only emphasised the revelational character of creation (following the line of Bavinck), but also laid special stress on God's creational revelation in unison with his written Word and Word incarnate.

We cannot go into the detail of their views here, but merely give an introductory overview. Therefore some of the most important figures who made contributions in this field are mentioned beforehand so that readers can study them in detail on their own. They are (in alphabetical order) the following : Fowler (especially 1985 but also 1991), Hart (1989), Marshall (1998) Mekkes (1965), Olthuis (1976, 1979, 1987), Seerveld (2000a, 2000b, 2000c and 2003), Spykman (1973a, 1973b, 1985 and 1992), Troost (1978 and 2004) and Wolters (1985).

2.5 One revelation in three ways

According to Spykman (1973a:19, also cf. 1981:149-150) it is important not to misunderstand "the Scriptures alone" (cf. above): "... the *sola Scriptura* in the ablative case, meaning *by* Scripture alone, should not be interpreted to mean that the Bible is the only source of revelation. For taking the Scripture seriously as Word of God leads to recognize God's Word in all its fullness, as manifest in creation and incarnation". He who recognises the Scriptures as the only revelation of God, lapses into fundamentalism (cf. Fowler, 1985:9).

2.5.1 A Biblical example

A simple example (which the writer used to explain God's threefold revelation to his students) is found in Matthew 2 verses 1-12 (the history of Christ's birth). The men from the East are led on by a special star (God's creational revelation); from Jerusalem they are guided further to the place of his birth by God's Scriptural revelation (the prophecy in Micha 5:1); finally they reach the Word incarnate, the Child, Jesus Christ.

2.5.2 The necessity

Why it was necessary for God to reveal Himself in three separate ways, is explained by Spykman as follows. Although God's creational revelation is clear, man's eyes have been blinded by his falling into sin, his ears are deafened, his mind clouded and his heart hardened so that he suppresses this revelation and substitutes his own pseudo-revelations. In his grace God "republishes" his Word, this time not in a "language" without words (Ps 19:1-4), but in the languages of the Old and New testament – his

inscripturated Word. As a result of our unwillingness to listen, God goes a further mile with us by bringing his Word even closer to us in the Person of his Son, Jesus Christ – the Word incarnate. As a human being Christ came and lived according to God’s will the way we should live. So not only does Christ make known to us God and his will, He also helps us to get to know ourselves as human beings and how we should live to experience true humanity. (Cf. Spykman, 1973a:20-21, 1973b:7,8 and 1992:78 *et seq.* where the key text references are also given on the threefold revelation in the Old and New Testament.) Thus God’s threefold revelation links up with the three main moments in history, (1) creation, (2) the fall of man and (3) salvation.

Summarised: “God published his Word first in creation. After sin, that Word was republished in Scripture. In the fullness of time that Word was personified in Jesus Christ” (Spykman, 1973a:8. Also cf. Spykman, 1981:153). This viewpoint could wrongly create the idea that the threefold revelation is chronologically delineated. However, God already spoke to Adam and Eve in Paradise and the Word (Christ) was there from the onset.

2.5.3 One revelation

It is of paramount importance that the age-old nature-grace dualism is not applied to God’s revelation. (Cf. especially Troost, 1978 and 2004.) Fowler emphasises that God reveals Himself only in creation (in nature, in human words in a book and in Christ who became human). “All revelation is natural in that it is given in and through the creation (nature), and all revelation is supernatural in that it is given by God who, as Creator, is above and beyond all that is created, and is known only by grace” (Fowler, 1985:7).

All Reformational philosophers therefore strongly stress the unity of God’s threefold revelation. Spykman (1992:83) says for instance: “... there is but one Word of God, not ... three. From beginning to end God issues a single Word, a consistent message, an unaltered will.” The most vital thing about God’s revelation is therefore making known his will or laws/commandments for life. Since creation reveals God’s ordinances to us, it is also the Christian’s task to try and ascertain the regularities in for instance biology, psychology and aesthetics (cf. Seerveld, 2000a:47).

2.6 The importance and correct understanding of creational revelation

Seerveld (2000a:47) further says that the scant attention paid to creational revelation arises from the fact that Evangelical Christians put all the

emphasis on the message of salvation in the Scriptures. He stresses that creation is also a revelation of God. Day and night God speaks to his creatures by means of “glossolalia” (or language without words). We therefore cannot deduct everything from the Bible, but have to study the taxonomy of a plant, personality types and economic laws ourselves. To expect cut and dried answers to things like these from the Scriptures, is an abuse of the Bible and an evasion of our own responsibility.

2.6.1 *Of paramount importance*

Elsewhere he stresses anew (cf. Seerveld, 2000b:205) the importance of creation and creational revelation: “Perhaps the most redemptive message we people of God can bring to our world in crisis is an articulate, biblically rich confession of creation”, for in this way we can get to know God’s creational order again.

It is of paramount importance to see this creational order correctly. Spykman assists in this by pointing out that creation only reveals God’s Word in a reflexive way. Only from the orderly functioning of the created things can we deduce which laws apply to them. In his own words: “The Word of God as such is transcendent. It is not directly accessible to human investigation. It is therefore misleading to say without qualification the creation *is* Divine revelation – that it *is* the Word of God. Such expressions carry pantheist overtones. Creational revelation is rather a *reflexive, responsive* concept. We gain insight ... by observing how God’s various creatures respond to the holding power of his Word, each creature ‘after its kind’. This holds for every aspect of reality: migrating birds, land use, human rationality, child development, ... reflection on our faith-life. Theoretical enquiry therefore calls for studying the *reflexive* impact of creational revelation as it impinges on each creature’s way of answering to the *response* side of God’s Word for creation” (Spykman, 1992:81).

2.6.2 *Understanding correctly essential*

Seerveld (2000c) assists us still further in understanding God’s creational revelation. First he points out that God’s glossolalia (just as his Scriptural revelation) can be abused in three ways. The first way is to misuse it moralistically (cf. Seerveld, 2000c:161 on how preachers completely misuse what Proverbs 30 :24-28 says about the ants, locusts, conies and lizards). A second wrong use is the dogmatic, which attempts to prove the existence of a Creator from creation. The third wrong way is the secularist attitude which is only interested in the regularities of creation, while ignoring or denying the existence of the Lawgiver.

Secondly Seerveld (2000c:163) points out that it is easier to “read” God’s creational revelation in the case of non-human things (matter, plants and animals). Just like the non-human the human can also have a revelational character, but it is not always the case. The reason for this is that God’s ordinations in the case of humans – contrary to the so-called laws of nature for matter, plants and animals – have a normative or optional character. People can therefore answer in obedience or disobedience (cf. Spykman above on the responsive character of God’s creational ordinations). Human feelings, historic events, economic similarities therefore are not as a matter of course God’s glossolalia, containing his norms for life.

2.6.3 Guidelines

So the next question that stands to reason is how God’s creational revelation can be read and used correctly. Seerveld (2000c:163) suggest two guidelines: (1) it should lead to the praise of and obedience to God; (2) it may not go further than the Scriptures, in other words it should be read in the light of the Scriptures.

This, however, leads to a next problem, namely the relation between the threefold revelation. Once more we give the word to several Reformational philosophers.

2.7 The relation between God’s creational and Scriptural revelation

Departing from the viewpoint of a unity in God’s revelation, Troost (1978) criticises in detail several differentiations (like “general” and “special” revelation) and even divisions made in God’s revelation. It even goes so far (cf. Troost, 1978:103) that some (like K. Barth) deny God’s creational revelation, while others again (like H.M. Kuitert) relativises his revelation in the Scriptures. When one wants to listen to the Bible alone, it leads to Biblicism. And when one studies creation without the light afforded by the Scriptures, the result is secularism (cf. Spykman, 1981:152).

2.7.1 The differences

Troost agrees with other Reformational philosophers (cf. above) that God reveals his creational order or will in the Scriptures as well as in creation. The Bible is something special because it makes it clear that God pursues his intention with creation in spite of the Fall. Scripture pertains especially to God’s work of salvation, to the liberation of creation, so that it can once more obey God’s creational ordinance and be healed. (Cf. Troost, 1978:125.)

Therefore the Scriptures do not *take the place* of Gods creational revelation, but is not merely a *repetition* of it either. Spykman's word "republication" can create the wrong impression. But Spykman explains it as follows: "In Scripture God's Word comes to us in *lingual* form ... Moreover, in Scripture God's Word comes to us in the language of *redemption* to renew our hearts, to open our eyes to see and our ears to hear what God has been saying to us from the very beginning" (Spykman, 1973a:9. Cf. also Spykman, 1992:125 for a full exposition.)

According to Fowler (1985:11, 12) the uniqueness of the Scriptures does not lie only in the form (as a revelation in language), but also in its contents: it was inspired by God Himself (and is therefore authoritative) and fills a specific soteriological function (its message of salvation).

2.7.2 *A restricted role*

Fowler (1985:24) thus stresses what was stated above, namely that the Scriptures, although *indispensable*, still has a *restricted* role. We cannot solve all our questions and problems by means of it (the way biblicistic fundamentalism attempts to do). For most problems one has to study carefully the regularities in creation. (Wolters, 1985:32 uses the example of a choice of occupation. In such a choice one should consider a number of factors, like your own personality, financial and other circumstances, and finally take a decision in the light of the Scriptures.)

2.7.3 *The Bible underestimated?*

If within Reformational philosophy so much emphasis is placed on God's creational revelation, the question could be raised whether it perhaps tends to the opposite extreme to fundamentalistic theology by underestimating the Bible. Fowler (1985:8,9) is of the opinion that it does not do so, since it is only from the Scriptures that one can know "nature" as God's creation and therefore as revelation.

Spykman too (cf. above) emphasises that creational revelation can only be understood in the light of the Scriptures. According to him man is called "to discern the norms of God's creational Word for our life in this world, illuminated and directed by his Word in Scripture, under the regal authority of his Word in-carnate ..." (Spykman, 1992:84).

To use an image, the Scriptures play a similar role to an architect who explains the building plan of a house orally to a builder who does not understand the plan, so that the builder can erect the house properly (cf. Wolters, 1985:33). Another image is that of a miner who works in the dark

mine shaft with an electric lamp on his forehead. He does not look *into* the lamp, but does his work *in the light of* the lamp. In the same way one does not look for answers to all possible questions in the Bible. One investigates creation. But it should be done in the light of the Scriptures (creation, fall, salvation and consummation).

2.7.4 *Interactive correction*

Fowler (1985:9) differs from Spykman in that he goes further by stating that the believer should not only “read” creation in the light of the Scriptures, but also the other way round. It is not the intention that the two forms of God’s *revelation* should correct each other – they are equally true and authoritative – but that our *interpretation* of creation should be corrected by the Scriptures and our *interpretation* of the Scriptures by God’s creational revelation.

Reading the Scriptures in the light of God’s creational revelation may give the impression that the interpretation of the Bible is made dependent on something outside the Scriptures and that it is thereby reletavised. Fowler’s answer (cf. 1985:9,10) to this is that it is a simple fact that one cannot understand the Scriptures in isolation from ourselves and the world around us. The Scriptures, for instance, use common words (like man, woman, children, slaves, princes) which can only be understood in the light of an ordered creation.

He explains: “We always relate to Scripture in the context of our prior experience of the Word-ordered creation... without that experience it would be impossible to understand the Scriptures. For this reason it is impossible to begin with ‘just the Bible’... our experience of creation shapes our understanding of Scripture and, because of sin, in certain respects is bound to misshape it” (Fowler, 1985:21).

It may therefore be necessary to revise our imperfect understanding of God’s creational order so that we may not misunderstand the Scriptures too. Therefore Fowler emphasises yet a third element, namely the communion of the believers.

2.7.5 *Continual interaction*

To summarise, Fowler stresses the interaction between (1) the Scriptural Word, (2) creation as ordered by God’s Word and (3) the believers saved by the Word under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. “There must be scope for a free movement back and forth from the Scriptures to the creation to the living faith of the Christian community, a movement that moves not

just in one direction but in all directions at different points” (Fowler, 1985:24).

Finally it is vital that this whole process takes place in the light of *the* Light, the Word incarnate. This is particularly stressed by Hart (1989:147). Not only should creation be read and studied in the light of the Scriptures, but the Scriptures should be regarded in the light of Christ – the culmination of God’s revelation.

2.8 Valuable insights

Some of the most valuable insights from the above are amongst others that (1) the Scriptures are an important part, but not the only revelation of God and that they can therefore only be seen correctly in relation to God’s complete revelation; (2) that the Scriptures come to us in a unique way as far as it concerns form (in language) and contents (inspired by God, having a message of salvation). Subsequently we will reflect on this message of salvation to determine more precisely the nature or character of the Scriptures.

3. The nature of the Scriptures seen from its contents or message

Within the Protestant Reformed tradition it is accepted (especially since the previous century) that the whole Bible, in spite of its various literary genres, have only one central message: the promise, advent and consummation of God’s kingdom. The best scholarly work in this field is probably still that written by Ridderbos (1975). The whole revelational history of the Scriptures is also dealt with from the perspective of the covenant and the kingdom of God in the more popular four volume work of De Graaf (1977-1981).

3.1 A drama in six acts

In a more recent work Bartholomew & Goheen (2004:12) also emphasise that the Bible is not a hodgepodge of theological doctrine, moral lessons, historical, edifying or poetic pieces, principles, etc. The Bible contains only one “story”, the “unified and progressively unfolding drama of God’s action in history for the salvation of the whole world”. This drama is concerned with the “unified, coherent narrative of God’s ongoing work within his kingdom”(Bartholomew & Goheen, 2004:12).

Six acts of the drama can be discerned: (1) at creation God *found*s his kingdom; (2) the fall into sin means *rebellion against* his kingship; (3)

salvation begins with the choice of Israel as his covenant people; (4) *salvation finally comes* with the advent of Christ; (5) then the gospel (the good news) of his *kingdom is disseminated worldwide*; (6) at the end of the world (Christ's second coming) *salvation will be completed*. (Also cf. Greidanus, 1988:235-238.)

3.2 A special kind of history

The history we find in the Bible (cf. Greidanus, 1988:86 *et seq.*), therefore, is not the usual economic, political, social or any other kind of history. It is history with a deeper dimension, namely the history of the kingdom.

3.3 A worldviewish book

In this way the Scriptures of God answer our most vital questions like the following: Who am I? Where do I find myself (in creation and history)? What went wrong? What is the solution?

Reformulated: the light the Scriptures offer is that of creation, fall, salvation and consummation (or: formation, deformation, reformation and culmination). These four are not only the peaks of God's revelation in the Scriptures, but without them creation is not intelligible either. Therefore they form the basis on which a Christian worldview is built with the aim of answering man's ultimate questions.

3.4 The result thus far

The redemptive nature of the Bible as a book can now be detailed further. It is not concerned in the first instance with people and personal salvation. It was written and should be read from the perspective of God's kingship which encompasses the whole of reality.

Since not everybody who reads the Bible reads it from such a cosmic kingdom perspective, we subsequently look at the various ways in which people interpret the Bible.

4. The variety of approaches to, or hermeneutic keys to the Bible

A method should be linked, or suitable to the subject at which it is aimed. (One does not cut down a tree with a razor or shave one's beard with an axe!) It is therefore possible to deduce much about their (intuitive or more explicit) views on the Scriptures held by both the ordinary reader of the Bible and the theologian from their various methods. What follows below is therefore not a detailed exposition on hermeneutics (see the valuable

overviews of Rossouw, 1981 & Zuidema, 1971). It is concerned with the various views on the Scriptures which lie behind the different hermeneutic methods. Seerveld (2003:xii) says with right: “People have different Bibles depending on what they assume it to be – what is the main, true story of the Bible”.

4.1 The various methods

It is important how one reads the Bible – just believing that the Bible is the Word of God, is not sufficient to understand it correctly (cf. Seerveld, 2003:xi). Although they often overlap, the following eight more popular and also scientific hermeneutic methods can be differentiated. (For details as well as valuable critique of each cf. e.g. Bartholomew & Goheen, 2004; Greidanus, 1988; Olthuis, 1976, 1979 & 1987; Seerveld, 2003; Spykman, 1973b & 1985; Van der Walt, 2006:22-88.)

4.1.1 The allegorical method

This is one of the oldest methods in the history of Christianity which attempts to look for the “true” or “deeper” meaning behind the literal meaning of a passage in the Scriptures. (Cf. e.g. Van der Walt, 2006:82, 83 for examples of how the parables of Christ as well as the book Song of Solomon were explained allegorically.)

This method did have the idea that the Bible is a unique book which should be read in a different way from ordinary writing. Unfortunately it led to the reader reading his own thoughts into the Scriptures (eisegesis) rather than explaining (exegesis) the Word of God. Besides, according to this approach only the theologically initiated can recover the “deeper” meaning from the Scriptures.

This method and the view of the Scriptures on which it is founded, were rejected as early as the 16th Century Reformation in favour of the priority of the literal meaning of a passage from Scripture as well as access of common believers to God’s Word.

4.1.2 The fragmentary method

This name denotes the popular five minute daily devotions in our rushed times taken from various Bible passages which have to present solutions for all kinds of personal problems. (One could thus also call it an *ad hoc* method.) It is often coupled with individualism (“Jesus and the soul”) – while the Bible stresses the covenant, the communion of the believers and the kingdom of God (cf. De Graaf, 1979, part 3:12).

The underlying view of the Scriptures is probably that it is an anthology with unconnected lessons for life or spiritual nourishment (“fast food”) for every day situations the individual faces. Thus the Scriptures do not present a unity or a central, continuous message (cf. above). Seerveld, however, regards it of cardinal importance that the Scriptures should be seen and read as a unity and that every part can only be understood correctly in the light of the whole: “Reading and interpreting the Bible piecemeal does violence to its integrity as a single, unified text. Treating the Bible, wittingly or not, as a patchwork quilt of oracles or fragments or homilies encourages everyone to indulge in his or her whims” (Seerveld, 2003:xii).

4.1.3 *The spiritualising method*

This happens when readers ignore the basic historical and earthly things treated in a specific passage from Scripture in favour of a “spiritual” analogy. The real story of Joseph in the well (Genesis 37:24) for instance is applied as comfort for contemporary readers who are “spiritually down in the dumps”. Or the story in Mark 4:35-41 (Jesus calms the storm) is spiritualised to “storms on the sea of life”.

In this connection De Graaf (1979, part 3:13) warns against mysticism: “While there is indeed a mystical union or communion between Christ and His people, *mysticism* derogates from the written Word of God as it fixes the believers mind on his own inner experience. The believer’s certainty of faith is made to reside exclusively in some inner consciousness of a spiritual experience instead of being attached to the prophetic Word of God. And when adherents of mysticism study the Bible, it is more to reinforce this innate religious sense”.

Although it can be very easy to try and make the Bible relevant in this way, it amounts to a warping or skewing of the Word rather than an explanation of it.

According to this method the Scriptures are probably regarded as a spiritual or supernatural revelation – a viewpoint which has already proved to be unacceptable.

4.1.4 *The encyclopedising method*

While the method just treated expects too little of the Bible, this method expects too much. It turns the Word into an encyclopedia which offers information on all kinds of subjects and answers to every possible problem. Some so-called Christian scientists consider the Bible as a

manual on for instance geology, agriculture, astronomy, politics, education and more!

In this way questions are put to the Bible that it is not meant to answer – too much is asked of it. The Bible is not a scientific manual, but is written in pre-scientific, everyday language. So this method, too, has the wrong view of the kind of book the Bible is. Its unique nature is not perceived.

4.1.5 The moralising method

In this case a passage from Scripture is turned into a simplistic, moralising programme of do's and don'ts. It is a very simple and therefore popular manner of reading and preaching the life histories of Bible characters. Their virtues are held up as motivation and their vices as warnings for contemporary readers or listeners. For instance the worldly attitude of Lot, the faith of Abraham, the obstinacy of Moses, etc. (Cf. Greidanus, 1988:116-118, 161 *et seq.* and 175-181; Spykman, 1985:53-61; Seerveld, 2003:22-28 and Van der Walt, 2006:83,84 for numerous examples as well as thorough critique of this method.)

Such a viewpoint maims the Bible or reduces it to a moral writing and extremely restricts its nature and meaning. From what was said above it has already become clear that the Word has a much wider, life-encompassing, cosmic meaning. Although the “ethical” manner of reading the Bible employed by Snyman (2007) does differ from the moralising method, in the author's opinion it still does not do justice to the true nature of the Scriptures.

4.1.6 The historical-critical method

From the just mentioned work by Snyman (2007) it emanates clearly how vital the historical context of the writer and contemporary reader is for understanding the Bible correctly. Historical critical hermeneutics, however, approaches the Bible as a collection of ordinary historical documents and attempts to ascertain according to a positivistic idea of science how and when the various parts of the Bible originated and whether they can be regarded as historically dependable. Tales of wonder are usually rejected. (For a thorough critique on but also appreciation of this method cf. Seerveld, 2003:29-34.) With right Greidanus (1988:25-30) remarks that although this method has produced significant contributions, it approaches the Scriptures from an unbiblical worldview and causes great uncertainty for believers.

4.1.7 The dogmatic method

This method was and is rather popular with Evangelical and Reformed Bible readers. The Word of God is read and studied to deduce from it certain propositions, teachings or specific doctrines or (since they are already believed) merely to confirm these.

The work by Hart (1989) explains this approach to the Bible in detail and also offers thorough critique of it. It gives rise to Christians thinking that as long as they subscribe to certain biblically founded doctrines – while their hearts are unmoved – they are true believers. Seerveld (2003:34-37) also takes a close look at this approach. According to him the gravest risk of such a method is probably that one's own and preconceived dogmas or worldview prevent one from really being confronted and corrected by the Word of God. (If one reads the Scriptures like this, it is like looking into a mirror – one merely sees one's own image – instead of looking through a window to new things.)

This method implies a very narrow-minded, reductionistic view of the nature of the Word. It is seen in a one-sided way as a doctrinal book.

4.1.8 Various literary methods

Since the 16th century Reformation theologians have preferred a grammatical method (often combined with a historical element and therefore called “grammatical historical”) of reading the Bible. The Bible was regarded as literature and the simple literal meaning as the most important. Meantime a variety of literary methods of reading the Scriptures has sprung up. So, for instance, Greidanus (1988:51) differentiates between “source criticism, form criticism, redaction criticism and historical criticism”.

Once again it has to be said that all these methods are not simply discarded here as if they have no value. Text criticism can result in a better text; historical criticism makes one more alert to the historical context; form criticism draws attention to the original oral tradition, while editorial critique makes one aware of the possible editors and the original sources they might have used.

Yet even the various literary methods do not really solve the issue of the unique character of the Scriptures – it is more than an ordinary literary work.

4.2 In a wider philosophical perspective

As stated above, God reveals Himself in creation, in words (a book) and in a human being, Jesus Christ. In all three instances the means of

revelation is therefore something that was created. Since creation can be studied and analysed philosophically, it also applies to the Bible.

In Reformational philosophy this analysis usually takes place by means of a variety of modalities or aspects of reality. (Cf. Van der Walt, 2006:142-152 for an overview of the doctrine of modalities.) The following 15 modalities (from the simplest to the most complicated) can be differentiated: (1) the arithmetic or numerical; (2) spatial (3) kinematic, (4) physical, (5) biotic, (6) psychic or sensitive, (7) logical, (8) historical, (9) lingual, (10) social, (11) economic, (12) aesthetic, (13) juridical, (14) ethical and (15) faith aspect.

4.3 The multi-dimensional character of the Bible

When applied to the Scriptures, the above means that as something that was created, it shares in all these facets. The Bible, for instance, exhibits

- a *physical* side, for it is written/printed on parchment/paper;
- a *historical* side, for it tells what God did during the course of history;
- a *logical* facet: it is comprehensible;
- a *lingual* facet: it was first handed over orally, later committed to writing in the original languages and today translated into many languages;
- a *moral* aspect: it gives guidelines on how one should live in an ethically correct way.

4.4 The uniqueness of the language of faith

As can be seen from the account of the various hermeneutic methods, they did note some of these facets, e.g. the lingual, historical and moral. Most of these methods, however, do not do justice to the pistis or faith side, which is the most important facet of the Scriptures. The Scriptures do have a share in all the above-mentioned facets, but it is qualified by the last-mentioned, the modality of faith. Faith (15) therefore “colours” all the other aspects (14-1) This perspective on the Bible was worked out in more detail by some figures in Reformational philosophy – the next section.

5. The Bible as a book of certainty of faith

The three most important figures in this regard are Sinnema (1975), Spykman (1973b and 1985) and Olthuis (1979, 1987). Their views are summarised one after the other from which it will also transpire how they complement one another.

5.1 *Sinnema's contribution*

Sinnema (1975) did essential preliminary work by pointing out that language is not merely language but is always qualified by some or other aspect. So the language of court proceedings is juridically qualified, scientific language logically, business language economically and colloquial language among people socially qualified (cf. Sinnema, 1975:6).

5.1.1 *The language of faith*

In order to understand the Bible correctly, it is therefore essential to know what kind of language it uses. It is the language of faith, language qualified by the faith aspect. The language of faith is not supernatural language, but ordinary human language which is qualified in a different way from the other kinds of languages mentioned. Biblical language is not the same as scientific theological language either. (Ordinary language of faith expresses a specific faith, while theological language analyses it scientifically.) Sinnema denotes this kind of language as “certitudinal discourse”.

5.1.2 *Having authority over all aspects of life*

Sinnema further points out the vital role the faith facet plays in one's whole life. Referring to the former aspects (1-14) faith integrates all parts of life, or “colours” them. There are no further aspects beyond 15. Therefore faith points out beyond creation to the transcendent God/ god or man's last certainty. Via faith the Scriptures therefore have authority over all aspects of life.

In the light of the certitudinal language used by the Bible, Sinnema shows further that it is wrong to simply call certain books in the Old and New Testament “historical books”. According to him they are “certitudinal, not historical writings.”

5.2 *Spykman's contribution*

This Reformational philosopher continues building on what is found in Sinnema.

5.2.1 *A confessional book*

He does not use the word “certitudinal” but prefers “confessional” to qualify the Bible message, but he has in mind the same aspect of faith as Sinnema. He also indicates that the Bible is not primarily a political, economic, psychological or social book. (Spykman, 1073a:11).

By “confessional” Spykman (cf. 1985:63, 64) does not mean man’s subjective experiences about God. He explicitly says (1985:49) that the Bible is the Word of God in the words of human language.

5.2.2 *Examples*

According to Spykman it is possible to learn from the Bible something about the political aspects of the reign of David or of the economic boom during the reign of Solomon. One can also study the apostle Peter psychologically. Or Paul’s mission from a linguistic perspective. It is possible, because all these aspects of reality are present in the Scriptures. Otherwise the Bible would not have been a normal book and the history of salvation would not have been a real event. All these other facets are, however, subject to the faith facet which qualify or lead them all. (Cf. Spykman, 1992:130.)

5.2.3 *More than just ordinary history*

Spykman goes to a lot of trouble to indicate that the Bible does not present history in the normal sense of the word, but what he calls “prophetic history, interpreted history, history with a point” (cf. e.g. 1973a:11).

He also explains this type of confessional history by means of numerous examples from the Bible itself. Important kings of Israel, who in their time had great influence (e.g. Omri) are mentioned in the books of Kings or Chronicles in a few verses only, because their relationship with God was wrong. On the other hand, much is related about politically insignificant figures, because they lived in obedience. So he who wants to know more on specific kings is referred to the original documents consulted by the writers when compiling these Bible books. (Naturally today we no longer possess these documents.)

Spykman summarises his own view on Scripture as follows: “At heart it is not a history book, but a confessing book, a book which confesses, testifies, witnesses, declares, proclaims the mighty acts of God in the history of redemption in a Christocentric way” (Spykman, 1973a:14).

5.2.4 *Nevertheless history is important*

While the one risk is to overemphasise the historical aspect of the Bible, so that the leading aspect of faith is obscured (cf. 4.1.6 above), the opposite can also happen. In Bultmann’s well-known kerugmatic theology almost the only thing that remains is a message (*kerugma*) without any historical grounds. Spykman therefore stresses that the Bible is history of *salvation* as well as *history* of salvation. The Scriptures have a historical

base, it emphasises itself that its message is anchored in real historical events (cf. Spykman, 1973a:14).

Subsequently we pay attention to a third Reformational philosopher who expanded the foregoing insights of Sinnema and Spykman.

5.3 The contribution of Olthuis

Although Olthuis expanded his insights into the Scriptures to his own unique hermeneutics (cf. Olthuis, 1987) we here concentrate on his view of the Scriptures.

5.3.1 A particular kind of book

According to Olthuis the Bible as a book is lingual by nature. However, there are many kinds of books, like telephone directories, books of verse, law books, novels, history books and many more. (A law book is of a juridical and a book of verse of an aesthetic nature.) To read a novel like a history book or a telephone book like a social register is a serious error which also violates the book .

In a similar way the Bible is abused and its nature infringed when it is read, for instance, primarily as a moral handbook, systematic theology, a compilation of psychological case studies, literary anthology or political history.

According to Olthuis the Bible is a book of “certainty”, a certainty which can only be accepted in faith and cannot be proved rationally (cf. Olthuis, 1976:1). He also uses (cf. 1976:14) other terms when he says: “... the Scriptures rearticulate the Word of God redemptively in a specific focus which we shall call the certainty (or variously the doxological or confessional) focus”. So he uses terminology already found in the works of Sinnema and Spykman.

5.3.2 Numerous examples for the Scriptures

Some of the examples mentioned by Olthuis, are here repeated briefly, since they serve to illustrate his view of the Scriptures.

When the Bible says in Matthew 6:26 that God feeds the birds of the heavens, it is not a denial that they have to look for food themselves. It is meant to convince the readers that God will take care in a like manner for them and that therefore they need not worry about food and clothes.

When Elizabeth says about her pregnancy that it is the Lord who did this to her (Luke 1:25) it does not mean she is denying the sexual and biological aspects of her pregnancy. But in the last instance one receives children as a gift from the Lord.

Psalm 127:1, which says that the builders will work in vain if the Lord does not build the house, therefore does not deny that building a house demands money, hard work, sand, bricks and lots more. Like all the other passages in the Scriptures the focus is different. In this case it wants to confess and proclaim that building not done in obedience to and with the blessing of the Lord, will not last.

The emigration of Naomi and Abimelech to Moab (cf. Ruth 1:1-5) in the Bible is not a mere matter of economy and politics. The confessional or certainty dimension is emphasised: their lack of faith that the Lord would provide for them in their own country.

Likewise the conquest of Canaan (cf. Numbers 13, 14) in the Scriptures is much more than merely a military operation – it was a matter of faith or no faith in God.

5.3.3 *Authoritative over all aspects of life*

When the faith aspect qualify in this way the rest of life, the Biblical message is not *restricted* according to Olthuis. (For instance to something spiritual or supernatural which spurns or denies the rest of reality.) Rather all of life is *channelled*. As pointed out in the work of Sinnema, faith not only plays an *integrating* part in all other aspects of human life. It also *unlocks* all of life in the light of the transcendent. Via his certitudinal dimension the Scriptures have authority over all of life (cf. Olthuis, 1979:82). The Bible need not be “made relevant” by means of all kinds of methods (like the allegorical or encyclopedic).

For this reason Olthuis cannot accept the historical or grammatical methods of reading the Bible, since these kinds of hermeneutics often do not do full justice to the Scriptures as a book of ultimate certainty.

Even more important: If the Bible was ordinary literature or history, it could not have authority over all aspects of life. (Under part 4.2 above it was shown that the historical and lingual aspects are considerably “lower” on the scale of modalities of reality. They do not fill the leading or highest place that the faith aspect does.) In this connection we finally give the word to Olthuis himself: “History in the Scriptures is certitudinally qualified. It is no more or less historical than economic, political or general cultural histories. But just as these kinds of histories have their own focus, as do histories of music and art, sport and recreation, certitudinal history is written with a distinct focus: ultimate realities, ultimate questions and ultimate certainty” (Olthuis, 1987:42).5.4

5.4 Conclusion

From the fore-going exposition of the views of Sinnema, Spykman and Olthuis it becomes clear that – even though they use different terms – Reformational philosophy is able explain the unique nature of Scripture better than Reformed theology.

Since not all Reformational philosophers approach the Scriptures in the same way as these three philosophers, we finally have to say something about the viewpoint of Hart.

6. The Bible as light

In the Reformational tradition the Scriptures have also been looked at by Hart (1989) by means of the metaphor of light. First we point out the similarities between his viewpoint and that of other Reformational philosophers.

6.1 Similarities

Hart agrees with the Reformational philosophers we have dealt with already that the Bible is a book of faith: “The Bible is a book of faith, written in faith, to be read in faith, to be embodied in faith” (Hart, 1989:137). This he also applies to the more historical parts of the Scriptures: “Israel’s history in the Bible is not a historian’s history, but the history of faith, told in faith, to be heard in faith and to be incorporated in our own journey of faith” (Hart, 1989:48).

6.2 The Bible as a lamp

Hart, however, prefers to denote the Bible as a light (lamp). He regards such a metaphor as an antipode against all kinds of wrong views and explanations of the Bible, among which the intellectualistic and the legalistic. In his own words: “The Bible can be read as a book of light better than an infallible text of objective truth (doctrine), theological propositions or moralistic legal codes” (Hart, 1989:16). He therefore also rejects the dogmatic and moralistic hermeneutic methods dealt with earlier.

6.3 Intellectualism and moralism

The following descriptions of intellectualism and moralism are central to the understanding of Hart’s viewpoint.

“... Intellectualism treats faith as an intellectual function: assent to revealed propositions, agreed upon explanations, understood doctrines,

accepted definitions, believed information, and other rational-conceptual matters” (Hart, 1989:97).

Moralism (cf. Hart, 1989:102, 130) again entails that faith is moralised; that one should stick to the literal rules of the Bible without applying it to our own times. In other words it implies the absolutising of historically relative criteria.

Intellectualism is about logical or doctrinal purity, while moralism pursues ethical perfection (cf. p. 104). However, according to Hart we do not know God by accepting a system of rules, but by following Jesus Christ in practice. To him faith is not in the first instance subscribing to ideas or being subject to laws, but of walking the road with a Person (cf. p. 109).

6.4 *Christ, the heart of God’s revelation*

From the foregoing it has become clear that Hart puts great emphasis on the revelation incarnate in Christ. According to Hart *He* is the heart of God’s revelation, his last Word to us (cf. p. 176). In *Him* is concentrated and fully revealed everything that God wants to say to us and asks from us - his total will (cf. p. 23).

6.5 *Believers as light*

Hart also stresses that not only is the Bible a lamp and Christ the Light, but that the light of the Morning Star should also shine in the hearts of the believers and should shine forth from their lives. The light they give off is not by way of something intellectual (dependable concepts or insights), but should take on flesh and blood or be incarnated in their lifestyle. “Seeing the Bible as lamp and Jesus as light requires that the light shines in Jesus’ followers” (Hart, 1989:43). He calls it an “incarnational” or “embodied” view of the Bible instead of current intellectualistic and moralistic views.

6.6 *More relevant for today*

Hart (1989:43) is of the opinion that such a view of the Bible is more relevant for contemporary times. For, in contrast to earlier times, when all emphasis was put on the truth (doctrinal purity), believers today rather put the emphasis on experience. He describes the difference in spiritual climate as follows: “Whereas redemption in the doctrinal tradition is one of the doctrines of whose truth we can be assured, in the contemporary climate redemption is an event believers want to experience, share and spread... to experience more and more that Jesus truly heals their wounds” (Hart, 1989:123)

Modern man is not concerned so much with a *faultless* truth as with a *lightgiving* truth, not an intellectual light, but a light on the road of life (cf. p. 88). To follow Jesus Christ is therefore much more significant than knowing and subscribing to a confession or a dogmatic system.

6.7 Summary

In short, in opposition to earlier dogmatism, Hart places a Person (Christ), and in opposition to the rules of moralism, the direction or way the Light shows is stressed.

Finally it is mentioned that Van der Walt (2006:80-81) independent from Hart also uses the metaphor of light when he deals with reading the Scriptures. He differentiates a fivefold light: (1) God Himself is Light; (2) He creates light; (3) Christ is the Light for the world; (4) God's Word is a light and (5) believers are called to be light bearers in the world. It should also be stressed that the five-fold light is not a mere metaphor but a reality.

7. Review: the value of the foregoing reflection

Briefly summarised the five main sections of the investigation rendered the following:

- (1) The Scriptures are not God's only revelation, but a part of his threefold revelation which can only be understood properly in relationship to God's creational and incarnated revelation. The Bible is unique as far its form (in human language) as well as its contents (a redemptive message inspired by God) are concerned.
- (2) The Bible contains the history of the origin of God's kingdom, the rebellion against it, creation's liberation from sin as well as the final consummation of his kingdom. These main points (creation, fall, salvation and consummation) provide the basic building blocks for a Christian worldview which answers the most vital issues of life.
- (3) The various hermeneutic methods do recognise certain facets of the Scriptures, but are inclined to absolutise them and to reduce the Bible to one of them. In contrast to this, a Christian philosophy offers a view which both explains the multidimensional character of the Scriptures and highlights its unique character of faith.
- (4) When the Bible is viewed as a book of faith it can be read not only in a new way (the one-sidedness of existing methods are overcome), but it also becomes clear how it can have authority over all aspects of life.

(5) Finally it was shown how yet another view of the Scriptures from the angle of the metaphor of light can help one further to avoid erroneous viewpoints (intellectualistic and moralistic) and to read the Word of God with new eyes: it demands personal surrender and a following of the Light, Jesus Christ.

This concludes the aim with this reflection on the unique nature of the Bible. In a following study the implications of this new view of the Scriptures for its reading and interpretation will have to be spelt out further. Now there is only space to jot down a few flashes.

8. Preview: the hermeneutic implications

Every believer desires to read the Bible in such a way that he/she clearly hears God speaking. In the light of the above insights, how can one ensure that this happens?

8.1 *No simple undertaking*

Actually reading the Bible in the light of the foregoing is not a simple undertaking. Seerveld (2003:89, 90) mentions the following: one should (1) delve deeply into the Bible text; (2) learn the original languages or consult different translations; (3) attempt to determine the original historical circumstances; (4) consult commentaries on the specific passage of Scripture; (5) preferably study the Scriptures together with fellow-believers. More important still: “a person waits on the Lord, wrestles with the God-speaking text, and finally hears the Holy Spirit’s voice of the text which humbles you to your knees... and a mission of redemptive service” (Seerveld 2003:90).

The following suggestions may be of further help (cf. Seerveld, 2003:90 and Van der Walt, 2006:84-89).

8.2 *Points of departure*

Only he/she who (1) believes that the Scriptures (read in connection with his revelation in creation and Christ) is the Word of God, (2) has a desire to listen seriously to it, (3) expecting God Himself to speak to him/her, and (4) does it while praying for the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit (the Author of the Word), will indeed be able to read the Bible in such away that he/she hears God’s voice in it.

8.3 *Unity*

This key-word (unity) amongst other things implies that one should (1) attempt to determine the place of the particular passage (text, chapter,

book) in the Scriptures as a whole, and (2) also keep in mind the Bible's focus on faith . (3) A difficult passage in the Scriptures can also be compared to other less complicated parts in order to get a better understanding.

8.4 Variety

The meaning of this key-word is: (1) that one should make sure what kind of text the specific passage is (a historical text, a song, proverb, parable, gospel, letter, etc.) to ensure that it is read according to its kind (genre). (2) Further one should also ascertain in which act of the drama of the history of God's kingdom the specific passage falls. (This is to prevent one from reading, for instance, a passage which foretells the advent of the kingdom as if it has already come, or the other way round.)

8.5 Context

As far as possible the historical context should be investigated, the times and circumstances of the writer and the first readers. (2) Then the textual context: the context of a word is the sentence in which it appears, the context of the sentence is the paragraph, of the paragraph, the book, the Old or New Testament and finally the Bible as a whole. Working as if in concentric circles one should go from the inner to the outer circle, or the other way round.

8.6 Focus

One should continuously keep in mind the unique confessional nature of the Bible as explained above. (1) On the one hand it will help one not to expect too much from the Bible. (2) On the other hand not too little either, for via the focus of faith it is relevant to our whole life.

8.7 Presuppositions

Since it is a vital facet of reading the Bible which is mostly neglected, something more will be said about the influence of the reader's own context, especially his/her worldview on his/her reading of the Bible.

Many believers are of the opinion that a respectful and devout attitude towards the Bible is sufficient to understand it correctly. One should simply read the Scriptures and listen to it with an attitude of faith.

However, whether one is prepared to acknowledge it or not, one always reads with tainted glasses and one listens with one's own ears (cf. Olthuis, 1979:66). Reading the Bible literally is a myth, according to Snyman (2007:83-96). Hart, too (2006) criticises the so-called *objective* reading of the Scriptures and advocates a *responsible* reading instead.

Therefore Olthuis (1987: 13, 32, 46) emphasises that it is no use reading the same passage over and over when Christians differ among themselves. One should rather raise the question from which presuppositions the clashing groups are reading the text on which they ground their opinions. Everyone is inclined to read into the text the worldview of himself or his group. In which case the Bible merely condones what one thinks instead of reforming one's worldview.

Therefore one's own worldwiewish lenses have to be cut in the light of the Scriptures to understand God's Word correctly. Above (cf. part 3.3) it was pointed out that the Bible is a worldwiewish book. Thus Olthuis can say: "Interpretation is the dialogic process of a hermeneutic spiral between interpreter (and his/her vision of life) and the text (and its implied vision)" (1987:28).

There are many other factors besides one's reading of the Bible that work together to determine one's worldview. One lives in a particular location, in a specific time, within a certain culture and socio-political-economic and educational circumstances. Besides one has one's own life history and unique personality and emotions. In the light of these the following two matters have to be duly stressed.

First one should not attempt to hide or deny one's worldwiewish interpretation of the Bible. Olthuis aptly puts it as follows: "Normative exegesis takes place when we are keenly aware of our pre-understandings or vision rather than when we try to hide them. Then we are able to let the Bible text speak in terms of the differences from and similarities with our own prejudices. Without such interaction interpreters easily, often unconsciously, trace their own visions and beliefs onto the text and then read them 'objectively' out of the text. Ironic and paradoxical as it may seem, the more aware we are of the fore-beliefs and fore-conceptions of our own visions, the more we are able to do justice to the message of the text" (Olthuis, 1987:29).

Elsewhere he reiterates it like this: "... the more we are aware of the pre-understandings that we bring to the text, the more it is possible to avoid making the 'text conform to *a priori* speculation'. Its precisely when we are unaware of our pre-understandings that we are most in danger of imposing on the text. 'After all, we come to the text clean!'" (Olthuis, 1987:86, 87).

The second important point is that in the dialogue between one's own worldview and Scripture – something that should never cease – the

message from the Scriptures should be given the highest authority. The reader of the Bible should always keep open the opportunity for his/ her own worldview to be tested, weighed, complemented, corrected and questioned by the Word of God. There are also other ways of testing the truth of one's worldview (which can unfortunately not be dealt with here) but the X-ray test of Scripture remains the key test to prevent one from becoming a captive of one's own worldview – even if it is a Christian one.

8.8 Obedience

Faith was mentioned (cf. part 8.2) as the point of departure in reading the Bible. As a test of the preceding series of hermeneutic guidelines the *result* of one's Bible reading has to be stressed. Hart (2006:73) formulates it as follows: "A crucial test of responsible reading is what happens in our lives as a result of reading the Bible. Failure to act on the text, leaving it as merely grasped in our heads, assented to, and perhaps discussed, means failing to trust the text, since guiding us is what the text intends. Failure to embody its meaning is a form of failing to read the text properly." Finally we have to keep in mind that one should not – even when equipped with the purest of views on the Scriptures and the best hermeneutic methods – attempt to own the Scriptures. Exactly the opposite is what should happen: The Word of God should take hold and deeply move our hearts.

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